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ABSTRACT

Two different clinical models provide different explanations of the interactions that typically occur in romantic love. One portrays love as one of the great delusions of the human experience, while the other suggests that romantic love is one of the great possibilities of the human experience. The delusional hypothesis, presented by Casler (1973) is a Freudian derivative, and defines love as "the fear of losing an important source of gratification." In this theory, love itself is not to blame, only our neurotic need for it. In contrast, Branden represents romantic love as a great possibility, and presents a more fully articulated, developmental perspective. According to Branden, the attraction upon which love is based derives from the "shock of recognition," a perception of a similar sense of life. The desire for psychological visibility is characterized by a strong, well-differentiatd ego and high self-esteem. There are several points of commonality between the two models. Both describe strong and weak individuals. Love itself serves as an important source of gratification in both models. Tennov (1979) offers evidence that there are, in fact, two different kinds of experiences possible within the context of romantic love. Whether romantic love indicates social competence or incompetence depends upon the reasons for entering the relationship, which in turn depend upon the state of the Self. Recognition of this dependency provides an important avenue for understanding both the love relationship and the Self that becomes romantically involved. (JAC)

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Romantic Love: A Special Case of Social Competence

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Romantic Love: A Special Case of Social Competence

This presentation is designed as a dispassionate discourse about a passionate topic. Though ostensibly declarative, the title and focus of the presentation subsume two questions which are really a single interrogative:

1. Is involvement in a romantic love relationship the manifestation of a healthy, differentiated Self. . .or the manifestation of an unhealthy, undifferentiated Self?

2. Is involvement in a romantic love relationship an indicant of social competence or social incompetence?

Positing the two questions in this way implies two important assumptions:

1. There is causal linkage between the health and level of differentiation of the Self and social competence.

2. Consequently, inferences about the relative health and level of differentiation of the Self can be made by examining the behavior of persons involved in intimate relationships (particularly those involving romantic love).

The primary task of this presentation will be to make the argument that such linkage is tenable.

Two different clinical models will be outlined, each providing a different retionale and explanation of the interactions that typically occur in romantic love relationships and, by inference, connoting different models of the Self. In general, one model portrays romantic love as one of the great <u>delusions</u> of the human experience, while the other suggests that romantic love is one of the great <u>possibilities</u>

of the human experience. The delusional hypothesis, represented by Casler (1973), will be examined first.

Casler's model is basically a Freudian derivative with implicit invocation of traditional Freudian concepts like (a) a fixed, closed, distributive psychic energy system; (b) the presence of unconscious ego defense mechanisms as a means of shoring up weak egos; and (c) depiction of love as a vehicle for ego impoverishment.

Casler views romantic love as a hoax, one of the cruel delusions of the human experience. He moderates this characterization only slightly with the qualifying remark that love itself is not to blame, only our neurotic need for it. His portrait of love as a hoax is summarized in the following line of reasoning:

1. Most people in society need approval because they are basically insecure.

2. Insecurity implies uncertainty about the gratification of basic needs.

3. Uncertainty leads to the seeking of acceptance, confirmation, and justification wherever we can find it. This is more than just a search---it is more like a constant (and occasionally desperate) quest for external validation.

4. If we find someone whose choices, preferences, etc., seem to coincide with our own (i.e., someone like us), this person becomes a potent source of external validation and, consequently, is very highly valued.

5. The presence of external validation becomes a source of self-esteem.

6. Emotional attachment to the external cource of self-validation and self-esteem becomes the basis for the subjective experience of love, the operative mechanism of which is usually the development of reciprocal delusion because of the other partner's corresponding needs for self-esteem. The reciprocal interaction provides for what Casler characterizes as a delusional, self-perpetuating snowball effect. "It is," according to Casler," a snowball with a rotten core."

Love, therefore, for Casler is "the fear of losing an important source of gratification."

Casler portrays the deepening spiral as one not only of delusion but also of dependency, i.e., as the spiral deepens, every increase in dependency increases the fear of losing the other person as an important source of gratification. Also implied is the loss of self-esteem since self-esteem is directly, situationally contingent on the continued presence of the external source of validation. For Casler, those who need to love are indeed weak, dependent people.

But, he also states that not everyone needs to love in this way and in doing so introduces the nonloving person as somewhat of a paragon of mental health. According to Casler, "if the need for love is based largely on insecurity, conformity to social pressure, and sexual frustration, then the person who is otherwise secure, independent, and has a satisfactory sex life (i.e., one who has reached adulthood without becoming what Casler describes as a "psychological cripple") will not need to love. He/she may enjoy loving,if they choose to do so, but will not need to do so. Unfortunately, Casler provides no information on how such people

manage to avoid the delusional/dependency traps and emerge whole and psychologically healthy into adulthood.

By contrast, Branden presents romantic love as one of the great possibilities of the human experience, and, in doing so, presents a more fully articulated developmental perspective.

As the foundation for his explanation of the development of the Self, Branden specifies the notion of ultimate psychological aloneness, i.e., each one of us are, in the final analysis, islands of consciousness. Further, The establishment of well defined ego boundaries between the infant and the world is the first step toward the development of the Self, and, as such, is one of the primary tasks of childhood. Beyond childhood, the maturational process of individuation involves the person in the acquisition of motor and cognitive skills which, in turn, provide access to experiences which form the of a sense of personal and physical identity. The complimentary processes of separation-individuation herald the child's birth as a human being. Without a well-developed Self, a clear sense of "I", there can be no meaningful love relationships, according to Branden. First, there must exist a Self. Then, and only then, does the possibility exist for what Branden describes as the exquisite encounter with another consciousness.

Central to this encounter is a Principle of Psychological Visibility. Branden reasons that since human beings are ultimatley alone, they both need and desire the experience of self-awareness that results from perceiving the Self as an objective existent through interaction with the consciousness of another person. According to Branden, the attraction upon which love may be based derives from what

he calls the "shock of recognition," a perception which comes from the perception of a similar sense of life, i.e., this person sees, experiences life as I do.

An important point to note is that psychological visibility does not necessarily imply love, but love must include psychological visibility. For Branden, the desire for psychological visibility is characterized by and is a manifestation of (a) a strong, well-differentiated ego; and (b) high, chronic self-esteem.

Further, for Branden, the purpose of love is to celebrate self-esteem, not to create it. Self-esteem is the precursor and primary prerequisite for love as Branden defines it. For Branden, self-esteem and autonomy are inseparable. Since he defines autonomy as the oerson's capacity for self-direction and self-regulation, autonomy appears to be a logical prerequisite for social competence.

As one might expect, Branden's definition of love is strikingly different from that offered by Casler.

For Branden, love represents "a disposition to experience the loved being as the embodiment of profoundly important personal values and, as such, a real or potential source of joy."

Romantic love is "a passionate spiritual-emotional-sexual attachment between a man and a woman that reflects a high regard for the value of the other's person." All elements must be present for the relationship to be definable as romantic love.

There is an implicit theory of Self embedded in this definition. Rather than a rigid, defensive Self pasted together with ego defenses, the kind of Self described in Branden's definition is a robust, confident entity that can risk temporary relaxation of ego boundaries

to merge with another consciousness in search of a higher level of self-differentiation.

At the same time, it should be made clear that the kind of Self implied in Branden's definition of romantic love is by no means universal and may, in fact, be quite rare. Moreover, Branden both acknowledges and describes the process whereby persons become emotionally involved for the wrong reasons in the kind of relationship so eloquently characterized as a "rotten snowball" by Casler.

There are several points of commonality between the two models although on the face of it Casler and Branden appear to be describing very different processes, experiences, and individuals. Closer examination suggests, however, that the two models are parallel and may be describing precisely the same kind of person.

For one thing, both models clearly describe two kinds of individuals: a Strong case and a Weak case, if you will, with the Strong case for each being described as autonomous, independent, self-confident, and relatively rare; and the Weak case for each being described as dependent, insecure, and uncertain.

Love itself serves as an important source of gratification in both models. In each model, love appears to be something that the Strong case person may want but does not need, whereas for the Weak case person, love appears to be something that is needed (perhaps desperately) to furnish something that the Self cannot furnish itself (i.e., self-esteem). Consequently, Strong case persons in each model possess a high chronic level of self-esteem prior to choosing to enter a romantic love relationship, whereas the self-esteem

of Weak case persons is directly contingent on the reciprocation of the love object.

Therefore, it appears that although the emphasis is quite different in each of the models (Casler-weak; Branden-strong), each is describing two different modes of Self, and, consequently, two different kinds of involvement in a romantic love relationship. The question might appropriately be raised: so what? or more specifically, how do we know that what has been described is not simply speculative coincidence?

Tennov (1979) has provided evidence which bears directly on that question as well as the initial ones. On the basis of questionnaires, examination of personal diaries and letters, and in depth interviews with over 1600 subjects, Tennov (1979) describes the common occurrence of a phenomenon that she calls <u>limerance</u>. According to Tennov, the following are characteristic of limerance:

1. intensive thinking about the object of one's passionate desire (or Limerant Object)

2. acute longing for reciprocation

3. dependency of one's mood state on one's interpretation of the Limerant Object's actions with regard to the probability of reciprocation

4. fear of rejection and unsettling shyness in the presence of the Limerant Object

5. acute sensitivity to any thought or act that can be favorably interpreted as reciprocation on the part of the Limerant Object

6. feelings of buoyancy when reciprocation seems evident, and, conversely, severe depression and emotional upheaval if reciprocation is unattainable.

Tennov also describes the phenomenon of what she calls the nonlimerant person. The descriptor "nonlimerant" refers to a person who is not limerant at the time. Tennov is careful to make a distinction between limerance as a state and as a trait and stipulates that there is no limerant or nonlimerant personality. For Tennov, either state can exist in the same person over time. Like his/her limerant counterpart, the nonlimerant person may experience attraction, affection, or friendship for another person but without the compulsive and intrusive fantasizing and desperate need for exclusivity.

Tennov's work is important because it offers some empirical evidence for the position that there are, in fact, two quite different kinds of experiences possible within the context of a romantic love relationship. Moreover, the characteristics of the limerant person's involvement appear to correspond quite closely to those of the Weak case postulated by Casler and Branden. Concurrently, the characteristics of the limerant person described by Tennov seem to be congruent with the Strong case postulated by Casler and Branden.

One may now ask "how do these distinctions bear on the original questions, i.e., what of the assumed relationship between state of Self, social competence, and involvement in a romantic love relationship?

Given that it appears that two different kinds of experiences are possible within a romantic love relationship, Branden's concept of autonomy is the key to unraveling the original questions.

Given the Strong-Weak dichotomy that has been outlined for Casler, Branden, and Tennov, different levels of individual autonomy and, therefore, social competence, are clearly identifiable for each of the dichotomous elements. Casler/Branden's Strong case persons and Tennov's

nonlimerant person appear to be highly autonomous, independent, and self-controlled. Casler/Branden's Weak case and Tennov's limerant person appear to be insecure, dependent, and other-controlled.

Casler/Branden's Strong case persons and Tennov's nonlimerant person appear to possess high chronic self-esteem and choose to become involved in a relationship, whereas Casler/Branden's Weak case persons and Tennov's limerants apparently possess chronic low self-esteem and are drawn into a relationship as a means of obtaining what is otherwise unavailable to them.

Consequently, the inference can be made that the kind of Self connoted by the Strong case/nonlimerant rubric is indeed healthier (by most conventional standards) and more highly differentiated than that connoted by the Weak case or limerance.

In direct answer to the original questions posed about whether involvement in a romantic love relationship is the manifestation of a healthy, differentiated Self/unhealthy, undifferentiated Self. . . or if romantic involvement is an indicant of social competence or social incompetence, the answer is an unequivocal "that depends," i.e., it can be either, depending on the reasons for entering the relationship, which, in turn, depends on the state of the Self that becomes involved. Recognition of the fact that different kinds of Selves become involved romantically for very different reasons provides an important and promising avenue for understanding both the romantic love relationship as well as the Self that becomes romantically involved.

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